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Pentagon

Vietnam Consequence: Quiet From the Military

By RICHARD HALLORAN

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WASHINGTON, May 1 — In the widening and increasingly intense debate over the Reagan Administration's policy on Central America, one voice has been noticeably quiet. The nation's senior military officers have had little to say in public.

The reason, in a word: Vietnam. Not the Vietnam of a bloody war a long way from home, but the Vietnam of what they see as an absence of a national commitment, of a solid consensus supporting a carefully devised and executed policy.

Many military officers bear emotional as well as physical scars from being in Vietnam and feeling that nobody at home was behind them. The generals and colonels at the top today were the lieutenant colonels and captains who fought in Vietnam yesterday.

"We were the scapegoats of that conflict," said a senior officer. "We're the ones pulling back on the reins on this one."

The reluctance among military officers was reinforced by a reaction in Congress to the President's address Wednesday night. Military officers pointed to the applause President Reagan got when he said that no American combat troops would be sent to Central America.

Advice from the Joint Chiefs

The reluctance, staff officers said, has shown up in advice from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who are the senior military advisers to the President and to Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger. They said the chiefs had strongly recommended against looking for military solutions. Aides to Mr. Weinberger said he had agreed.

The lack of enthusiasm for dispatching American military forces to Central America has been compounded by what some officers consider privately to be disarray in the Administration and a wide gap between policy and action.

They said that top officers enthusiastically supported a policy paper entitled "U.S. Policy in Central America and Cuba Through F.Y.84" that was drawn up a year ago by the National Security Council. It outlined a strategy to foster political reform, regional cooperation, economic aid, military assistance and public information.

But the officers complained that the policy had not been executed, largely

because no one in the Administration was in charge of carrying it out. They hoped the President's speech would correct that. "They're trying to get their act together now," said one officer.

Issues Called Political

Several senior officers were critical of the Administration for failing to nurture a public consensus. "The military and the C.I.A. are doing as they're told but that hasn't been coupled with public affairs or persuading Congress," said an officer. "We're not presenting the American people with the facts."

Many military officers said the problems in Central America were basically not military problems and that the military therefore shouldn't be asked to solve them. They asserted that the issues were mainly political, economic and internal.

Many officers said they had learned from Vietnam that if a foreign government was either unwilling or unable to undertake political action and economic reform or to provide internal security, there was little the United States could do.

Internal security is for police and paramilitary forces to provide, the officers said, and not for regular troops. If United States help was requested, that would be a task for the Army's Special Forces and similar units in the Navy and Air Force, they said.

Moreover, several officers argued, the real threat was not in Central America but from Cuba and the Soviet Union. They contended that it would be useless to get bogged down in a fight in Central America unless the nation was willing to confront the main adversaries.

Question of the Draft

Officers in the Army, which would bear the brunt of a battle in Central America, said their service was just getting new weapons to replace obsolete equipment or arms burned up in Vietnam. They said they didn't want that supply consumed in Central America when they might have to fight more threatening enemies.

The military services, particularly the Army, are just getting the volunteer force on its feet, 10 years after the draft ended. Fighting in Central America could well lead to a return to the draft, the officers said, with all the divisiveness that would entail.

The Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Edward S. Meyer, once summed up in a speech a bit of ancient military philosophy that seemed to lie behind the thinking of officers today. "Armies don't fight wars," he said. "Nations fight wars."

On another occasion, he expanded on that thought, saying: "When the United States Army, which is genuinely a people's army, is committed, the American people are committed. And when the American people drop that commitment, then the Army cannot remain committed."